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## WHO CONTROLS JUSTICE? GODS VERSUS MORTALS IN TWO GREEK DRAMAS

by  
Kelly Harmon

Aeschylus and Sophocles were prominent Greek dramatists who produced tragedies in fifth-century Athens. Since they were contemporaries, they faced many of the same questions addressed at that time by poets, playwrights, and philosophers alike. One such common question, regarding the placement of justice, is addressed by Aeschylus in the *Oresteia*, and by Sophocles in *Antigone*.

In the three plays of the *Oresteia*, to whom do mortals look for justice? Do they believe that they themselves decide what is just, or that it is up to the gods to do so?

... Not from the lips of men the gods heard justice, but in one firm cast they  
laid their votes within the urn of blood that Ilium must die ...

(*Agamemnon*, II. 814-816)

In this passage, Agamemnon, who has just returned victoriously from the Trojan War, credits the gods with voting to destroy Ilium (Troy). This, he believes, was an act of justice, because the Trojans deserved to be punished for supporting their prince when he stole Helen. Agamemnon's words have added significance because he explicitly states that the gods do not hear justice "from the lips of men," but that by vote they determine it themselves.

Agamemnon holds the viewpoint typical of characters in the first play of the *Oresteia*. Aegisthus, though his concept of what is right differs from Agamemnon's, also credits the gods with delivering justice:

Now I can say once more that the high gods look down on mortal crimes to  
vindicate the right at last ...

(*Agamemnon*, II. 1578-1579)

He is calling Agamemnon's death an act of justice, obviously in direct opposition to what Agamemnon himself would consider just, but nevertheless he shares the same belief: justice is determined by gods.

The Chorus in *Agamemnon* echoes the attitude of the characters. Furthermore, since the chorus is composed of Argive elders, it figuratively represents the common and traditional attitude of the people of Argos. Thus when the Chorus, like Agamemnon, calls the fall of Troy an immortal pronouncement of justice, it is indicating a general belief of the Argives: the gods bring justice upon mortals. In lines 1561-1564, the Chorus explicitly states this point of view:

The spoiler is robbed; he killed, he has paid. The truth stands ever beside  
God's throne eternal: he who has wrought shall pay; that is law.

"Truth" is the law of justice: "he who has wrought shall pay." This law is administered by the gods, for "truth stands ever beside God's throne . . ." The Chorus, in these words, again echoes the prevalent belief of the characters and of the Argive people. The gods, they feel, pronounce justice.

This conclusion, however, only holds true for *Agamemnon*. The second play of the *Oresteia* presents somewhat different views of justice — it no longer rests entirely in the hands of the gods. A subtle difference emerges at almost the beginning of *The Libation Bearers*, as Electra indicates in her prayer:

... Let Earth and conquering Justice, and all gods beside, give aid.  
(*The Libation Bearers*, II. 147-148)

Electra speaks as if justice was no longer a possession of the gods, but instead stood alongside the gods as a separate force. This interpretation of her viewpoint gains support when Electra tells Orestes, "... let Force and Right and Zeus almighty, third with them, be on your side." She is clearly referring to Right as something independent of Zeus. The gods, in her eyes, no longer determine what is just, since justice now stands by itself.

The Chorus echoes this new concept of justice. It says that "The spirit of Right cries out aloud and extracts atonement due: blood stroke for the stroke of blood shall be paid" (*The Libation Bearers*, II. 310-313). Significantly it is the "spirit of Right" extracting atonement. In the preceding *Agamemnon*, doubtlessly the gods would have extracted atonement. At this point, however, justice has its own identity. It has become a force no longer directed by the gods — instead of appealing to gods for justice, the characters appeal to justice independently, asking it to manifest itself.

What, then, is the place of the gods in this new paradigm? As both Electra and the Chorus indicate, by appealing both to justice *and* to the gods, they have not been discarded: but what exactly is their new relationship with justice?

"O gods, be just in what you bring to pass," cries Electra, asking for Agamemnon's murder to be avenged (*The Libation Bearers*, I. 462). She is asking not for the gods to determine justice, but to act in accordance with it. This is their new role — to choose whether they will concur with that separate force and act as administrators of justice. Thus, when the characters appeal to the gods in *The Libation Bearers*, they are asking the gods to support what is just.

For example, when Orestes plans to avenge Agamemnon's murder, he says, "And now I call upon the god who stands close, to look on, and guide the actions of my sword" (*The Libation Bearers*, II. 583-584). The Chorus makes a contrasting reference to the sword: "[it] edges near the lungs. It stabs deep, bittersharp, and right drives it. . ." (*The Libation Bearers*, II. 639-641). Right drives it. Orestes asks the gods to "guide" his sword, but on the other hand it is right, or justice, which does not merely guide the



sword, but drives it deep — justice is the catalytic force responsible for vengeance, while the gods' role is only to guide the sword — to serve as a mechanism that conveys justice.

This relationship between the gods and justice differs slightly but significantly from the relationship found in the first play of the *Oresteia*. Justice, considered to be entirely in the gods' hands in *Agamemnon*, becomes a force separate from the gods in the second play. The characters, instead of asking the gods to administer justice, ask them to facilitate it by cooperating with that force which they (the gods) no longer control. Justice, in *The Libation Bearers*, has been taken out of the hands of the gods by the mortal characters.

However, it is not yet in the hands of mortals — they are not ready to take upon themselves the responsibility of determining justice. Electra and the Chorus have made this point at the beginning of the second play: the Chorus advises Electra to invoke the coming of a man to act against Agamemnon's murderers, and Electra responds, "To come to judge them, or to give them punishment?" (*The Libation Bearers*, II. 119-120). (To give punishment would mean that judgment had already been made by the punisher.) When the Chorus responds in the next line: "Say simply: one to kill them, for the life they took," it is evading Electra's question because it does not want to say that justice is determined by mortals. This position is maintained throughout *The Libation Bearers*. The characters view justice as an independently acting natural force. They have wrested it from the hands of the gods, but they will not yet take it into their own hands.

This final transition remains for the third play of the *Oresteia*. In the *Eumenides*, Athena thrusts the *responsibility* for determining justice into the hands of men. She creates a jury of twelve men to decide whether Orestes acted rightly or wrongly when he murdered his mother. What has prompted Athena's arrangement that lets mortals determine justice? The gods are in disagreement over what is just. Apollo thinks that Orestes acted rightly, but the Furies claim that he acted wrongly, and that it is their right to punish him. The dilemma cannot be resolved, not even by Athena, the goddess of wisdom. The gods in this case are unable to decide what is right. The only course of action that Athena can think of is to put the question to men. By doing so, she symbolically transfers justice into the hands of mortals.

But the transition is not a simple one. For the twelve jurors arrive at a split decision, and the decision reverts to Athena. If the message of Aeschylus is that responsibility for justice had finally been accepted by men, then why do the jurors fail to make a decision?

In the first place, the reversion of the decision to Athena suggests that people who have long looked to the gods for justice cannot immediately look to themselves. They are accustomed to believing that the gods determine right and wrong, and it is a tremendous step for men to assume this responsibility, a step that cannot be completed in one quick forward move.

Secondly, Aeschylus illustrates a problem that is universal to the determination of justice. Men themselves are not in agreement about justice, and putting it into their

hands will not, in the future, guarantee a simple solution to the problem of deciding what is right and wrong.

Thirdly, Athena makes a significant decision when the ruling reverts to her:

There is no mother anywhere who gave me birth, and, but for marriage, I am always for the male with all my heart, and strongly on my father's side. So, in a case where the wife has killed her husband, lord of the house, her death shall not mean most to me. And if the other votes are even, then Orestes wins.

(*The Eumenides* II. 736-741)

The significance of her decision is that it is not based on wisdom, but on whim — the reason cited is a trivial one. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, is shown to be a poor determiner of justice. If the gods make such arbitrary decisions about what is right and wrong, then mortals have good reason for taking the task upon themselves. Therefore it is not inconsistent that Athena makes the ruling. Men have already become aware that they are capable of determining justice themselves, and Athena's decision gives them an incentive to assume this responsibility, since it is a responsibility that she does not handle particularly well.

The conclusion of *The Eumenides* completes the three-stage transition of justice depicted in the *Oresteia*, and the sequence of stages correlates with the sequence of the plays in which they are found. The mortals in *Agamemnon*, the first play, hold the gods responsible for justice. In the second play, *The Libation Bearers*, the people no longer look to the gods for justice, but have not yet taken the responsibility for themselves. Instead they view justice as an independent force, determined by neither party. The transition is completed in the *Eumenides*, the final play of the *Oresteia*; Athena's establishment of a jury symbolizes the mortals' realization that justice resides in their own hands.

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Sophocles' *Antigone* concerns the same question of whether gods or mortals determine justice. The dilemma lies at the root of the conflict between Antigone and Creon. After Antigone is caught for breaking Creon's law that disallowed burial for Antigone's traitorous brother, she tells Creon:

For me it was not Zeus who made that order. Nor did that Justice who lives with the gods below mark out such laws to hold among mankind. Nor did I think your orders were so strong that you, a mortal man, could over-run the gods' unwritten and unfailing laws.

(*Antigone*, II. 450-455)



This is Antigone's unyielding position — she looks to the gods to decree justice, believing that their laws take precedence over those of mortals. It is for this reason that she has buried her slain brother, performing the proper religious rituals, in spite of Creon's order.

Creon adamantly maintains his right to legislate what is right, ignoring the gods' laws which have governed Antigone. His justification is that

... The man the state has put in place must have obedient hearing to his least command when it is right, and even when it's not.

(*Antigone*, II. 665-667)

With these words Creon asserts the supremacy of mortal laws, even if they oppose divine justice (and furthermore, even if they themselves are not just).

Creon stubbornly maintains his position, despite contrary advice from his son Haemon. When Haemon accuses Creon of acting unjustly, Creon replies, "Am I unjust, when I respect my office?" (*Antigone*, I. 744) Haemon responds in the next line, "You tread down the gods' due. Respect is gone." But he cannot convince Creon to yield to the gods' laws instead of imposing his own conflicting orders. Creon maintains his faith in mortal determination of justice as firmly as Antigone maintains her faith in the justice of the gods. As she is being led away to imprisonment in exile, she states, "Should the gods think that this is righteousness, in suffering I'll see my error clear" (*Antigone*, II. 925-926).

After Antigone departs, Creon's insistence on mortal right to rule causes him, first, to disregard the seer who advises him of his error. When the seer responds with terrible prophecies, Creon becomes frightened and reconsiders the decision to punish Antigone for her defiance. But he does not reconsider because of respect for the gods' justice. Instead, he says, "To yield is dreadful. But to stand against him. Dreadful to strike my spirit to destruction" (*Antigone*, II. 1095-1096). Creon does not say, "to stand against the gods." It is not the gods he fears. It is the seer, whose prophecies have always before been true. Creon still will not submit to governance by the justice of the gods.

While Creon is in this state of indecision, the Chorus, composed of Theban elders, advises him to free Antigone. Creon finally decides that he "can fight necessity no more" (*Antigone*, I. 1106). But he does not make this decision out of respect to the justice of the gods, saying: "I've come to fear it's best to hold the laws of old tradition to the end of life" (*Antigone*, II. 1113-1114). It is not the gods' laws that he credits for his action, but rather what he calls the "laws of old tradition." Even when he has surrendered his command and submitted to the rule of the gods, he will not admit to doing so. He will not acknowledge the gods' justice, which rightfully permitted Antigone to bury her brother in defiance of Creon's order.

Earlier in *Antigone*, Creon has argued with Haemon about whether Antigone's act was wrong, telling Haemon: "There is no greater wrong than disobedience" (I. 672). But disobedience to whom? Creon must have meant that the greatest wrong was in disobedience to the state. His statement to Haemon underscores the conflict between himself and Antigone, for Antigone has obviously believed that the greatest wrong is

disobedience to the gods. Therefore, according to her point of view, it is the gods who must ultimately define what is right. And Creon's opposing point of view dictates that what is right is determined by the state, in the person of the ruler — in other words, by mortals.

How is this dilemma resolved? Antigone is driven to suicide by Creon's punishment, but this does not mean that Creon triumphs, placing justice in the hands of mortals. Instead, the reverse happens. Creon meets with terrible ruin as a consequence of his actions against Antigone. By destroying Antigone, who is Haemon's bride-to-be, Creon destroys Haemon's love for his father and also causes Haemon to kill himself. Already burdened by guilt over his son's death, Creon returns home to find that he is also to blame for the death of his wife, who cursed Creon as Haemon's murderer as she killed herself with a sword.

Thus Creon's deliverance of what he believed to be justice has led to his great downfall. In the face of his ruin (although his wife's suicide has not yet been revealed), the Chorus tells him: "You have learned justice, though it comes too late" (*Antigone* I. 1270). Creon responds, "Yes, I have learned in sorrow. It was a god who struck, who has weighted my head with disaster . . ." (*Antigone* II. 1271- 1272). He has finally admitted that the gods' justice is supreme to what mortals may call right.

Regarding the question of where justice resides, how does *Antigone* compare to the *Oresteia*? The conclusions of the two dramas are opposites. With the trial in the final book of the *Oresteia*, Athena symbolically places justice in the hands of mortals — they become fully aware for the first time that mortals can administer justice. They no longer need believe that justice is administered by the gods, as they did at the beginning of the *Oresteia*. Instead justice, as viewed by mortals, has made the transition from the hands of the gods into the hands of men.

*Antigone* differs in its conclusion of where justice resides. Throughout the play, the question is not answered in different ways at different times, as it is in the *Oresteia*. Instead, the question is answered in two ways simultaneously, creating the conflict that lies at the heart of the drama. *Antigone* is commonly thought to depict the struggle between the individual conscience and the central power of the state. It dually depicts a second conflict, that between a mortal who seeks the justice of the gods, and one who disregards what is right by the gods and tries to take justice into mortal hands. Creon is punished for his offense to the gods, suggesting the conclusion that Antigone's viewpoint of justice is superior — humans should leave justice in the hands of the gods.

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Why should Aeschylus, in the *Oresteia*, and Sophocles, in *Antigone*, depict mortals who have reached opposite conclusions about whether justice resides with themselves or with the gods? The question can only be approached through a consideration of fifth-century Athens, in which the two playwrights created their dramas. During the fifth century, the city reached a cultural summit, driven by great intellectual blossom-



ing. The Greeks had a penchant for logic, and fifth-century Athenians, with growing faith in their logic, increasingly turned their attention to the logical problems of traditional religious and moral beliefs.

They were influenced in this interest by great intellectual figures such as Socrates, who "believed that what people had to do above all else was to discover what true goodness was."\* And they were influenced by less intellectual figures, primarily the Sophists. The contribution of the Sophists was that they learned young men how to speak and argue in public, teaching them to defend their opinions. The shortcoming of many Sophists was that they often thought it more important to win the argument than to reach the truth. However, by encouraging citizens of Athens to defend their positions successfully in debate, the sophists did accomplish the good of prompting many to address the questions being raised by philosophers, and consequently to advance their understanding of philosophical problems.

An inevitable question addressed by the philosopher and by the common citizen concerned the gods' administration of justice. How could the gods determine what was right, or moral, if they themselves often acted immorally? The intellectual fervor of fifth-century Athens brought this problem to the minds of many. One solution to the problem was to remove justice from the hands of the gods and to place it in the hands of mortals.

However, as the *Oresteia* indicates, such a major transition could only occur gradually, with steps forward and backward and with much walking the fence in between, debating whether justice belonged with the gods or with mortals. Both Aeschylus in the *Oresteia* and Sophocles in *Antigone* wrestled with this question. Some of their contemporary Athenian citizens realized, as Aeschylus and Sophocles probably did, that it was illogical to have amoral gods determining what was just. Yet traditional beliefs were very hard to relinquish. Considering the transitory, unfixed location of justice in the minds of many intellectual Athenians, it is not surprising that the question of whether it lodged with gods or mortals is resolved differently in the two great dramas.

\* Hugh Desmond Amos and Andrew George Paul Lang, *These Were The Greeks*. Chester Spring, Pa.: Dufour, 1982, 171.